

Two weeks ago, June and I had one of those rare experiences that sometimes come to grandparents. We went to pre-school with our youngest grandson where his class was going to recognize his fourth birthday and we were able to look in on the event. Montessori Academy #1 in Albuquerque, New Mexico is a school where every possible event is used as an opportunity to teach some lesson, and the birthday celebration was no exception. The class of ten or so three and four-year-olds were seated on the floor in their gathering semi-circle. The teacher, a man, lit a candle and placed it on a stool in the space enclosed by the seated children. He then handed Kenan a small globe of the Earth and explained that each year the Earth makes its journey around the Sun. The teacher explained that, at four years old, Kenan had completed four trips around the Sun. And so with the lighted candle representing the Sun, Kenan was asked to carry the globe around the candle four times while the class sang “The Earth goes ‘round the Sun; The Earth goes ‘round the Sun; Kenan goes ‘round the Sun; We all go ‘round the Sun.” All of this to the tune of *Farmer in the Dell*. Copernicus is alive and well in Albuquerque! And it is highly unlikely that any of those children will ever join the 20 percent of adult Americans who still believe that the Sun circles the Earth.

I tell that story because it reflects in an interesting way the teaching style of Jesus himself. Jesus was always teaching. No circumstance, no event, was passed by as an opportunity to teach some important lesson.

Jesus healed the sick. He cast out demons. He fed the hungry. He turned into rejoicing the pain and grief of death. In all of these things he was passionately and compassionately involved in all of the defining conditions and events of the human life he shared. He responded to human need wherever he encountered it. That was his character, and that was his example.

But in every case, in every event, he was also teaching. People often called him, “Teacher.” He was always teaching, whether by example, by parable, or by the active involvement of his chosen disciples. Think about that word *disciple*. We have absorbed the word into our churchly language, our “God talk,” and so diluted the word by familiarity, that we lose the full force of its meaning. I looked up “disciple” in the *American Heritage Dictionary*, certainly not a religious publication, and the first definition the dictionary gives is, “Disciple: One who subscribes to the teachings of a master and assists in spreading them.” “One who subscribes to the teachings of a master and assists in spreading them.” You can’t come any closer than that to describe the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, or to outline the purposes of his teaching.

Jesus taught because he had a wider, more universal, view than the immediate present. He worked in and for his own time, but at the same time he was building for a future he saw as eternal. He was laying the foundation of his church. He was preparing man -- and women too -- who would in their words, their work and the

witness of their lives, proclaim the Kingdom of God until that kingdom comes in all of its fullness. He was building a church that would be one body, holy and universal across all space and time, unto the ages of ages. That is the church of which you and I are a part and into whose glory Trinity Church is woven for this firefly-blink of time that we are given.

Jesus was teaching practical lessons that would guide and shape that church in any place and time.

There is no more practical lesson for any church than the one Jesus taught than he did that late afternoon when a large crowd of people gathered in an isolated place to hear his message. The day grew late and the people were hungry. They were hungry and the nearest places where they could buy food were at an inconvenient distance. You know the story. By the spiritual power flowing through the mortal Jesus, that vast crowd was fed with food to spare. We call it the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes.

But there is more: The Miracle itself tends to overshadow in our minds the lesson so skillfully woven into it. Jesus said, "You feed them." -- YOU feed them. This is a defining moment. A responsibility has been transferred. The burden of decision and action has been laid on those who would inherit Jesus' mission and work when he would not be there to give instructions.

I once was an observer at a training exercise for officer candidates in the Army. They were divided into small groups and one cadet was designated as group leader. The groups were given a series of problems and they were given materials with which to do the work. But the tools and materials seemed to be all wrong for the assignment or insufficient in amount. Imagination and lateral-thinking was required.

Something similar was going on with Jesus and his disciples. Those apprentice leaders for the church were asked to fulfill an assignment that at first glance seemed impossible. They inventoried the resources at their disposal and found them wanting. "We have only five loaves and two fish. We don't have the two hundred dinarii it would take to buy the food."

What they didn't count was the power of the Spirit working through the One who stood in their midst -- the one who said, "You feed them." They should have known that the one they called "Master" and "Teacher" would not ever set them an impossible task. It was only a matter of having eyes to see and hearts to believe.

I believe in Jesus' miracles. I am not one who tries to explain them. They are mysteries, wonderful mysteries, and I prefer to leave them at that. But here I would like to believe that the power of Jesus' presence and his message worked in the people themselves. The miracle was -- or could have been -- that Jesus' own compassion unlocked well-springs of generosity -- that hidden, secret, carefully hoarded caches of food were opened up, first by one and then another and another,

until the event became one huge family seaside picnic -- a picnic worthy to become a part of the gospel message. That is a miracle. And it can happen any place.

It can happen here. The lesson of the loaves and fish has to be learned and re-learned as it has over the past two thousand years. We have only five loaves and two fish. We, the Church in the world, have a God-given, Christ-commanded mission to feed his sheep in any of the ways we can find to do that. And we still are asking, "Where is the money? Where are the 200 dinarii?"

How slow we are to learn. How slow we are to learn that we have things backward, that the venture comes first and the resources follow. In Christ's work the "field of dreams" is a valid allegory: "Build it and they'll come." But how slow we are to get it. We talk about this wishfully and wistfully and then turn away to what we say is "practical." It's great stuff for a sermon, but it doesn't pay the bills. How slow we are to learn.

But it is exactly here that the rubber of faith hits the hard pavement of mission. It is our performance in mission, the extent to which we feed the sheep, that establishes our credibility in proclaiming the gospel. What the mission is, in what direction we are called to feed Christ's sheep, is the starting point and we need to be about it.

Nearing the end of his life, Jesus commissioned his followers in almost the same words as he had used to describe his own work: "Proclaim the Good News; Heal the sick, feed the hungry." That is the commission we have inherited and which we carry to our own world and time. Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams out of him as it did on that remote seashore and that power flows through our time also. That is the message of his resurrection, and that is the solid foundation of our Christian faith.